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SUBJECT The National Security Agency

DIANE SAWYER: What do you think is the largest U.S. intelligence agency? If you say the CIA, you're probably not alone in the number of people who say that, but you may be wrong.

Bob Pierpoint now gives us another look at a different gigantic secret agency.

WOMAN: We're doing a story about a federal government agency known as NSA. Do you know what it is and what it does?

MAN: No, I don't.

MAN: NSA? I know, insurance company.

MAN: No, I don't.

MAN: NSA? Nah.

WOMAN: NSA? I never heard of it.

MAN: The NSA.

ROBERT PIERPOINT: Officials of the National Security Agency are not likely to be offended that so few know what it is. In fact, the NSA likes it that way. Behind all this obscurity and steel fencing is an agency considered vital to the safety of this nation. It was founded in 1952 by President Harry Truman in an executive order that to this day is still stamped secret.

Headquartered at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Washington and Baltimore, the NSA operates quietly in these buildings, under which are said to be acres of the world's most

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highly sophisticated scientific computers. The computers work 'round the clock, storing, retrieving, filtering millions of words per day picked out of the ether by the agency's antennae at listening posts around the world and through spy-in-the-sky satellites which can be moved over sensitive areas for direct targeting.

James Bamford once worked for the NSA while an enlisted man in the Army. It took him three years to write a book about the agency, which he calls "The Puzzle Palace," and which intelligence experts agree is quite accurate.

JAMES BAMFORD: Well, the NSA is the largest intelligence agency in the United States. Its principal functions are three. It intercepts communications, intercepts information going through the air. It deciphers codes, break codes. And it maintains the United States' code system.

PIERPOINT: Bamford says the NSA's budget is around \$8 billion a year, that it employs some 80,000 people, about a third of them military and the rest civilians. It has a different mission from the better-known Central Intelligence Agency, which engages in human intelligence, so-called HUMINT. The CIA analyzes vast quantities of information, and a few of its agents also engage in traditional cloak-and-dagger type spying.

BAMFORD: The NSA is involved in eavesdropping, a thing called signals intelligence, which is picking up microwave and high-frequency and other type of signals that go through the air that contain telephone calls, telegrams, telex messages, data communication, virtually all types of communications. And in addition to that, information by telemetry.

Eighty-five percent of American intelligence comes from the NSA. NSA is the largest. The CIA is minute compared to the NSA.

PIERPOINT: Soviet missile launches in Central Asia were for many years monitored from a highly secret base in Iran, one of NSA's most important. But the Iranian revolution forced its closure, leaving a large gap in NSA's intelligence network.

The agency managed to recover by setting up a new listening post on Chinese soil.

Another base can be found in Yorkshire, England at Menweth Hill. And similar stations are located in Turkey, Australia, Thailand, and elsewhere.

Closer to home, the NSA operates a big listening post in a remote valley of the West Virginia countryside. Surrounded by

the thick woods of a national forest, the NSA eavesdrops under the cover of a military base.

In fact, the agency has been compared to a huge vacuum cleaner, sucking up through its vast electronic pipelines enormous quantities of words daily in a variety of languages.

We asked William Colby, a former Director of the CIA, which gets much of its raw intelligence from NSA, just how effective such an operation could be.

WILLIAM COLBY: Well, I thought it as a very effective, very useful, major contribution to our knowledge of what's happening in the world.

PIERPOINT: In 1975 the American people got their first official look at the activities of the NSA when the then-Director, General Lew Allen, Jr., testified before two congressional committees. One investigation was headed by former Senator Frank Church. The study was triggered by reports the agency had abused its powers by spying on Americans during the Vietnam War.

FRANK CHURCH: If its capacity is used to collect information that bears upon our national security, goes to the proper agency, and relates to foreign intelligence, then it's a tremendous asset to the United States. On the other hand, if those big electronic ears were ever turned around, you could see what a potential threat that could be to the liberties of the American people.

DIANE SAWYER: And tomorrow Robert Pierpoint asks and answers the question: Does the NSA listen to telephone conversations? And if so, which ones?